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This is the author's version of a work that was submitted/accepted for publication in the following source:

[Willsteed, John](#) (2014) Never Tear Us Apart : the tabloid version of the INXS story. *The Conversation*, February(10).

This file was downloaded from: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/68645/>

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INXS: Never Tear Us Apart

Maybe the ads ruined it for me. Certainly, it was thoroughly cross-promoted on the network. I think Kochie may have even mentioned it once or twice. The ads, though, contained the notable elements: the outrageous wiggery ESPECIALLY the mullets; all that petulance and flouncing; and the much-discussed, uncanny physical similarity of the actors to the main protagonists.

But it turned out that the ads were pretty much it. This was a series of events with very little to bind them into a story. It felt like a (not very good) comic strip – crudely drawn, brightly coloured, neatly framed. Fans will probably love it. I'm not one, though I was a bit of a one, once upon a time.

The story of INXS rising from the middle-class suburbs is told using a limited, and sometimes confusing, dramatic lexicon. Flashbacks to childhood, for instance, are graded differently. This colour change makes them look a little spooky, as though the memories aren't very pleasant. And the whole thing is peppered with recent 'interviews' in which the actors appear to be band members reminiscing about key points in the story from the present. This device does not work. If it was an egg-beater or a biro, you would throw it out.

One of the major elements of the story that does work is the recreation of the live musical sequences. These are active and colourful and mostly convincing in their blending with archival footage of real shows, audience reactions and fan voxpops. A painful exception to this comes when Andrew Farriss is trying to capture the beginnings of Need You Tonight in his home studio. He has the rhythm and the riff, and is adding a second guitar part. His first efforts are ridiculous, and in a different key, as though he can't remember how to play the guitar. It's just silly. But, after all, these are just details.

Experience tells me that the interesting thing about the band scenario – thrusting a bunch of creative folk into a bubble of touring and recording – is the evolving nature of the relationships. These relationships turn on small conversations and events, often seemingly inane, which create the tension that this story so desperately needs. The indicators used here are those of "success": big and bigger tours, awards and metallic records, buckets of drugs, and many nameless women in lingerie. It's as though Who Weekly were writing the story.

The pivotal moment in the INXS story, if the mini-series is to be believed, is the one in which Murphy informs the band that Hutchence and Andrew Farriss would become the sole songwriters. Although it leads to an album or two of hugely successful hits, it cannot last. There is short, sharp peak and then the inevitable, steady downward decline.

Other bands have dealt with these pivotal moments differently. The Beatles, The Small Faces, The Monkees are examples of bands that actively, and with some success, tried to discard their 'pop' image. They abandoned the formula for the experiment, and embraced the value of self-expression. They lost some fans and gained others. This is an equally difficult road to travel, and often equally disastrous – most bands eventually collapse, regardless of the path they choose – but it delivers the possibility of stories a lot more interesting than this one.

I said earlier that I was a bit of a fan. It was because of this: In 1984, INXS released a second single, "Burn For You", from "The Swing", their fourth album. It was a great single, rhythmic and dense and sonically rich. It had space and drama, and all the players were in it somewhere. It would sit neatly on a compilation between Hunters and Collectors "Talking to a Stranger" and The Triffids "Wide Open Road". The song, for me, is bound to Richard Lowenstein's film clip. Evocative images of early 80s North Queensland, the plane winding up the coast, lots of mangroves and extended shots of the backing singers. The band looked happy in the midst of all this warmth, greenery, lushness. I still love watching this clip. It relaxes me.

But they never returned to this idyllic theme. Everything became harsh, black and white, sharp lines and extreme contrast. In the constant striving to be more and more popular, to sell more and more things, they left the best bits behind.

Next Sunday, INXS: Never Tear Us Apart will conclude on the Seven Network.

I'll be watching Juno on 11. I just love that Michael Cera.

John Willsteed